



## BUILDING YOUR TEAM

A MEETING ICEBREAKER GUIDE

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

# THE 5-YEAR TIME MACHINE

Quick Icebreakers for Meetings

No props. Nothing to print. Zero prep time. Just one question about what you'd tell yourself five years ago — and a room full of advice worth acting on this week.

**Building Your Team**  
buildingyourteam.com

Published September 2026  
By the Editorial Team

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# One Question, Aimed Five Years Back

The 5-Year Time Machine asks each participant to imagine traveling back five years and offering their younger self one piece of career advice.

True to its name, the activity needs no props, nothing to print, and zero prep time, running 8 to 12 minutes depending on group size. This paper walks a facilitator through materials, group-size guidance, the full five-step run, and the debrief questions that turn reflective advice into decisions the team can act on this week.

**8–12 min**

total time, depending on group size

**4–30**

participants with no modifications  
needed

**Zero**

prep time required

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## Materials and Group Size



The whole point of this format is how little it asks of a facilitator to set up.

- **A timer**, or a phone stopwatch.
- **A whiteboard or flip chart** (optional), for capturing key words.
- **Markers**.

The activity works for 4 to 30 people with no modifications. Larger groups should break into circles of 5 to 6 people to keep the pacing tight.

# Run the Icebreaker



Five steps take the group from a quiet moment of reflection to a shared list of patterns worth acting on.

## 1 Present the question

Give the group 60 seconds of silent thinking time. If the room freezes, offer one of ten example topics as a concrete prompt.

## 2 Go around the room

Proceed in order, allowing 30 seconds per person. Leaders answer last, so they don't set the honesty ceiling for everyone else.

## 3 Capture key words

Write down key words from each response on the flip chart as the round goes.

## 4 Identify recurring patterns

Look across the captured words and share what patterns stand out to the group.

## 5 Connect to this week's decisions

Tie the patterns to actionable decisions the team can implement this week.

## Debrief Questions



The follow-up questions are designed to move advice out of the past tense and into something the team will actually do.

- Name one thing you will do differently before our next meeting.
- Which piece of advice, if you'd heard it five years ago, would have changed the most?
- What pattern in today's answers surprised you?
- Who in the room gave advice you wish you'd heard earlier in your own career?
- What's one piece of advice you'd want a new hire to hear on day one?

## Why Leaders Go Last



A small sequencing choice does a lot of work in this activity.

### FACILITATION NOTE

*Leaders answer last to avoid setting the honesty ceiling. When a manager speaks first, everyone after tends to calibrate to that level of vulnerability — going last lets the team set the tone instead.*

Combined with zero prep time and no props, that one sequencing rule is most of what makes this format work as well in a five-minute stand-up as it does in a longer offsite session.

## RELATED READING

# More From Building Your Team



- 
- 01 **First Job Lesson: Icebreaker Questions for Team Meetings.** [buildingyourteam.com/first-job-lesson-icebreaker-questions-team-meetings](https://buildingyourteam.com/first-job-lesson-icebreaker-questions-team-meetings)
  - 02 **Best Advice Circle: Professional Icebreaker Questions.** [buildingyourteam.com/best-advice-circle-professional-icebreaker-questions](https://buildingyourteam.com/best-advice-circle-professional-icebreaker-questions)
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## ABOUT



Building Your Team is a division of The Leaders Institute®, the company that pioneered the Build-A-Bike® charity team-building activity in 2005. Building Your Team publishes practical, field-tested team-building activities and facilitation guides for corporate meeting planners, HR leaders, and event professionals.

### **Want us to facilitate this activity for your group?**

Talk with our team about running The 5-Year Time Machine, or another meeting icebreaker, for your group.

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